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Jihadi-Salafism in Afghanistan— Beyond Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Daesh

Options for German foreign and development policy

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Recommendations

\ Urge the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA) to formulate an effective policy on religious institutions and curricula

Any new initiative at Islamic education sector reform must be preceded by a critical analysis of why previous reform attempts did not succeed, and religious scholars did not engage. The GoIRA should change budgeting priorities and consider allocating more resources to the construction and financing of community mosques and religious schools (madrassas) so that the field is not left to Wahhabi- and Salafi-inspired donors. External influences and funding for religious institutions regardless of sect should be cut off.

\ Support debates about the role of religion and ideology in Afghan society

The notion of Islam has increasingly become contested in Afghanistan due to the fragmentation of the political and religious landscape over the last decades. Jihadi interpretations of Islam have become widespread; Salafism and particularly militant Jihadi-Salafism is just one among several such ideologies. Additional funding lines should enable religious and non-religious civil society groups to launch grassroots and policy initiatives that could engage Afghans of all walks of life in broad-based debates about the role of religion and ideology in Afghan society.

\ Provide support for Afghanistan's future generations

An estimated 46 per cent of the Afghan population is under 15 years of age. Given the deteriorated security situation in many parts of the country since 2009, religious education is often the only option to learn. With the increasing influence of Salafi madrassas and mosques, a growing share of youth gets exposed to potentially radical thoughts through basic education. Thus, it is of utmost importance to expand and improve technical and financial support for non-partisan basic education, vocational training and high-quality secondary and higher education for Afghanistan's youth.

\ Capture lessons learned to prevent the spread of violent extremism and (co-)radicalization

Critically review German foreign and development policy regarding its potential impact on radicalization and countering violent extremism since the start of German engagement in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Future policies in Afghanistan as well as in other intervention contexts should take the lessons of this reflection into account. It can benefit the design of intervention strategies not only of the German government but also other members of the international community.

Jihadi-Salafism in Afghanistan—Beyond Taliban, al-Qaeda and Daesh

Daesh and the expansion of Jihadi-Salafism in Afghanistan

Since July 2017, the declared liberation of Mosul, Iraq, and the expected fall of Raqqa, Syria, has brought the debate about the survival of so-called Islamic State (Daesh) to the forefront. The loss of control over territory and people in Iraq and Syria raises the question whether Daesh will dissolve completely or whether it will survive the fall of Mosul and Raqqa. This *Policy Brief* argues that even if Daesh loses control of Raqqa and Mosul, Jihadi-Salafism will survive as a viable ideology in the Iraqi-Syrian region, but also continue to affect Afghanistan as well as Europe. The ideas that the Daesh group has cultivated among Sunni Muslim sympathizers and followers bear the potential for further radicalization and the spread of violent extremism for a generation to come. Current radicalization processes are likely to result in more violence, large-scale displacement and regional—cross-border—instability in Central and South Asia and increase the risks of terrorist attacks in Europe. Based on an in-depth analysis of Daesh in Afghanistan¹, its strategy and its current transformation, from a social movement perspective, we argue that Daesh's long-lasting impact is primarily ideological. More than adhering to a specific organizational model, Daesh is centrally about narrative and positioning itself as the “ideological hegemon of global jihadism” (Winter, 2017). The background and policy recommendations of this *Brief* advise German foreign and development policy how to counter the risk emanating from Jihadi-Salafism in Afghanistan.

Different Daeshs in various areas of Afghanistan

Research in Afghanistan showed that Daesh manifests itself in different organizational forms across the various regions of the country, depending on the particular local political dynamics and historical

path dependencies. Fighting both the Afghan government and the Taliban, Daesh was able to set up state-like institutions such as courts, prisons and a basic bureaucratic administration only in eastern Afghanistan. In other areas, such as north-eastern Afghanistan's Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan provinces, armed and militant Salafis fighting under the umbrella of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate declared allegiance to Daesh but were disarmed by the Taliban. In western and northern Afghanistan, Daesh exploited local conflicts and rifts within the Taliban and thus became a resource in local power struggles. In other areas, Daesh's potential, not actual presence was used by local officials to seek security-related resources from the central government or to distract from their own failures at governing.

This regionally differentiated manifestation of Daesh reflects the transformation of a hierarchical and homogenising state-like structure into a more acentric political formation. It appears that relations between Daesh supporters in Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria were never particularly direct and hierarchical even when the Islamic State controlled large swaths of territory. The emergence and presence of Daesh in Afghanistan and the combination of Salafism with violent, militarized Jihadism is not just an extension of the Islamic State's political project in Syria and Iraq. Local groups in Afghanistan found inspiration in Daesh without being closely integrated or coordinated by a central leadership structure. Even within Afghanistan, i.e. between Daesh's leadership council in Nangarhar province and groups operating in other areas of Afghanistan, order and response structures are weak and ad hoc. This reflects the highly fragmented Afghan political landscape which historically has not experienced a degree of state penetration comparable to Iraq and Syria.

Jihadi-Salafism, radicalization and the larger transformation of the religious landscape

The combination of violent jihad and Salafism is central to Daesh's strategy. This so-called Jihadi-Salafism

1 \ BICC and its Afghan research partner organization The Liaison Office (TLO) conducted a joint research project on the phenomenon of Daesh in Afghanistan between March and December 2016; funded by the German Federal Foreign Office. The results and details on the methodology are published in Mielke, K., & N. Miszak (2017)

will continue to shape Afghan society beyond the fall of Islamic State strongholds Raqqa and Mosul. Since the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s, the religious and social landscape in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, particularly affecting the Sunni community, has been in an ongoing process of transformation. This militarized and radicalizing environment has supported numerous violent jihadist groups² and provided a fertile ground for the emergence and partial consolidation of Daesh and the popularity of its ideology since its appearance in mid-2014.

Salafism is a relatively recent phenomenon in Afghanistan and has thrived since the toppling of the Taliban regime in late 2001 after the US-led intervention.³ The removal of the religiously conservative and certainly brutal Taliban regime and the simultaneous neglect of religion—a central component of social life in Afghanistan—by the international community’s peacebuilding efforts unwillingly opened space for public and private religious entrepreneurs to spread Islam of a Salafist inclination without sharing Daesh’s political objectives. The growing influence of Salafism goes hand in hand with the construction of a religious infrastructure by Gulf Arab countries. These countries have taken the lead in building mosques and *madrassas* in rural areas as well as in urban centres, appointing Salafist Imams, and thereby shaping the religious curriculum. Given the demographic structure of the Afghan population—more than 46 per cent are below 15 years of age—, increasing numbers of the population and especially youth are exposed to Salafi education. Religious basic education often remains the only option for learning in the context of deteriorating security conditions.

It cannot be emphasized enough that most Salafists do not support violence and disagree with Daesh’s political strategy and objectives. However, Daesh’s (limited) success in gaining a foothold in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderland stems from the combina-

tion of Salafism with the practice of violent jihad. As part of the ongoing transformation of the religious and social landscape in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, particularly affecting the Sunni community, Jihadi-Salafism is becoming increasingly influential at the expense of other schools of Islamic thinking.⁴ On the one hand, the members of groups that are not necessarily Salafist but share many of Daesh’s political goals and religious tenets—including the legitimacy of offensive jihad and violence against other Muslims—have been absorbed by Daesh, such as the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Islam. On the other hand, the traditionally quietist Salafis are becoming politicized and increasingly mobilize for offensive jihad or support thereof.

We should also note that the transformation of the religious landscape in Afghanistan and its border region with Pakistan is not exceptional. It is linked with similar processes elsewhere, including in Europe. After all, Daesh’s success consists not only in gaining a foothold in Afghanistan but also in attracting a large number of foreign fighters, many of them from Europe, not least through its effective propaganda and the emotive attraction of its narratives.

The lack of a counter-narrative to Daesh

By portraying itself as the force that is establishing the caliphate anticipated in the primary religious sources of Islam and that is redrawing the national boundaries set by the colonial powers in the Middle East in 1916, Daesh provides a master frame that introduces a new narrative to a global and Afghan audience. This frame and the wave of success between 2014 and 2016 proved effective in inspiring local groups in Afghanistan as well as in attracting

2 \ The use of the word jihadism, or jihadist, is controversial since jihad has a variety of violent and non-violent meanings. In this *Policy Brief*, jihadist is used in relation to violence and armed struggle.

3 \ Only in the provinces of Kunar and Nuristan did Salafism have local roots, which go back to the 1980s and even 1960s.

4 \ In contrast to the majority of the Afghan population and also the Taliban who are considered Deobandi-inspired Hanafis, Salafists reject the Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence and recognize only *hadith* and *Qur’an* as guiding sources of belief. Accordingly, they adhere to a purist version of Islam opposing innovation and – in their quietist representation – overcome this by non-violent missionary activity. The politicization of Islam and the notion of jihad have brought about the notion of offensive jihad which is shared by a large number of jihadi groups in the Muslim world and Afghanistan-Pakistan

large numbers of foreign, many of them European, fighters. Daesh has also proven capable of winning over part of the religious scholars and clerics (*ulama*), or of assuring that they remain silent and refrain from countering Daesh's propaganda. Many pro-government or impartial religious scholars and clerics feel unprotected and neglected by the Afghan government, live in fear for their lives and consequently remain silent or voice their support. The insecurity independent and government-related *ulama* face has largely eroded trust in the government and the national *ulama* council in Kabul. The latter is perceived as silent and inactive towards Daesh's propaganda; theological debates are not sought, and the council is inept at supporting the everyday struggle of those *ulama* who can neither fight Daesh nor start a debate with them.

Daesh's success and the larger transformation of the religious landscape in Afghanistan and Pakistan is due to the failure of the government, other jihadi groups, the Taliban or traditional and pro-government religious clerics to convincingly present alternatives. The Afghan government, in particular, has not succeeded in formulating an effective policy on and control of religious institutions, which includes the construction of religious infrastructure and the formulation of a modern curriculum. Similarly, the government of Pakistan has for long tolerated the mushrooming of radical religious seminaries in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) which provide the manpower for Daesh and other violent extremists. In hindsight, it seems crucial to review the formative years of the 2000s to understand how and why Salafi thought could spread quietly and prominently.

Two processes can explain the spread of Salafism: First, Western development aid organizations have meticulously avoided funding Islamic community institutions since 2002. Given the significance of Islam in everyday life of ordinary Afghans and the high demand for mosques and *madrassas* after the mass

return of refugees from neighbouring countries, the need for religious infrastructure and guidance at the community level explains why alternative funders of mosques and *madrassas* were not subjected to serious scrutiny. The void was filled by Gulf-Arab-funded NGOs, charities and private donors that not only constructed mosques and *madrassas* but also brought books and hired mullahs and teachers of a Salafist orientation. Second, the GoIRA did not succeed in reforming Islamic education. This has had the effect that, for example, the national Imam training centre in Kabul is funded by the United Arab Emirates. As concerns other Islamic education institutions such as the Islamic University currently being constructed by Saudi Arabia outside of Jalalabad (Nangarhar), it is not clear who will be in control of the curriculum, teachers' appointments and financial flows. Not only Daesh in Nangarhar but also non-Salafi religious education institutions use textbooks published (in 2003, 2011, 2010) by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Mission (*da'wa*) and Guidance of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Although anecdotal, these examples illustrate how the funding, building and equipment of religious education institutes are largely being outsourced to external agents without any recognizable regulation by the government.

Resource mobilization relies on trans-local and domestic *madrassa* networks

Instead of state control over religious institutions and their curriculum, a complex cross-regional and cross-border landscape of religious schools plays a significant role in providing religious education as well as propagating violent jihad in Afghanistan. Such structures are central for Daesh's resource mobilization, i.e. recruiting and financing, and link people on both sides of the Afghan and Pakistani border areas. Reflecting the absence of a centralized religious clergy and hierarchy among Sunni Muslims and a unified, coherent institutional structure, *madrassas* propagating extremist violence can operate unchecked.

Jihadi-Salafism constitutes the dominating force of influence driving the emergence and expansion of Daesh in Afghanistan but extremist violence is also propagated by groups that, while sharing many of Daesh's criticisms and expressed grievances, are not Salafist (e.g., Panjpiri who are Deobandi). Furthermore, while Salafists agree on common foundations of belief, they differ in the extent of their political engagement and are not necessarily connected to each other. Of the multiple Salafi networks that exist, few sojourn at the surface and become visible to some degree because they have formal political wings or are run by famous religious scholars. Others operate silently but are likely no less effective in their teachings and propaganda. Importantly, adherence to a Salafist creed partly overlaps with tribal, marriage and business links. These overlapping networks connect Salafi religious scholars of different ranks, their *madrassa*- and mosque-networks and various forms of charity organizations. These organizations complement the network by forming the link between well-known local clergy and their respective mosque- and *madrassa* networks with foreign donors, such as private persons, businessmen, bankers/ money changers, international Islamic charities/ foundations/ NGOs, primarily from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Gulf Arab countries (Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, etc.).

German development aid and other international donors should consider revising the established funding practice in rural and urban development programmes that exclude support for the building of community mosques and *madrassas*. This practice has caused communities to seek traditional ways of funding for mosques and local *madrassas*, either through a long-term process of collecting money themselves and/ or increasing reliance on Islamic charities and non-governmental organizations from Gulf Arab countries and Pakistan to fill the void. These funding organizations, often with Wahhabi-Salafist orientation, would usually appoint the local cleric in charge who would teach respective content.

International sponsors finance Afghan charity organizations, *madrassas* and mosques

While relations between Daesh in Afghanistan and the IS-headquarters in Raqqa do not appear to be strongly institutionalized, private donors from Gulf Arab countries play a more prominent role in supporting Daesh in Afghanistan—in particular with regard to funding and the popularization of Jihadi-Salafist and Wahhabi ideological doctrines. These types of funding have a long tradition since resources had been mobilized en masse for jihad in the 1980s. Local resource-generation relies mainly on imposing taxes on valuables according to Islamic law. However, evidence from the research locations shows a mixed picture of taxation practices that correspond to the different degrees of Daesh's presence and actual consolidation of its rule. The role of Afghan and Pakistani businessmen in fundraising is not to be underestimated as is the nexus of Salafi religious authority and business. cursory evidence from looking at some of the main organizers of trans-local Salafi networks suggests a strong correlation of business and religious networks. Funds destined for Daesh in Afghanistan that are not raised locally are said to be transferred mainly in two ways: Through money and value transfer services such as the *hawala* system or from person to person (cash couriers). From Pakistan, a few such *hawala*-operators send money to Afghanistan. Many donors and non-state charities are connected to individuals situated primarily in Gulf Arab countries and Pakistan. At the same time, these same states are at the forefront of countermeasures against the financing of terrorism. This complicates international relations with countries and individuals pursuing entirely different policies, for example in the case of Saudi Arabia.

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